

The Best of

By LCdr. Wes Bannister

Following one-and-a-half months of events in support of Operation Noble Eagle, I was up for a BITS (back in the saddle) hop following the Thanksgiving holiday downtime. My crew consisted of a lieutenant starting his last year at the command as aircraft commander, a lieutenant junior grade on his first mission commander hop, another department head, and our CAG chaplain. Our planned timeline was a 2200 brief, assume an alert-30 posture until our midnight walk-time, launch from Norfolk Chambers Field at 0100, maintain station and surveillance for three hours, and finally recover at 0500 at Norfolk.

The already-airborne crew wanted us to launch a few minutes early to provide a PIREP for their recovery. I started to flight plan about 45 minutes before the brief time and I collected TAFs for every military divert on the East Coast, from southern New York to North Carolina and as far west as Ohio. The news wasn't good. For the first time in my operational experience flying from ashore, I was faced with 100-foot ceilings at and visibilities measured in fractions of a mile.

For over an hour and a half, my copilot and I mulled options for our destination and an alternate. We kept sliding our brief time. With noth-

ing working out because of forecasted weather, we decided to cancel. We cut the chaplain loose and, in doing so, probably took our first step toward a downward spiral. The duty officer's phone call to NORAD to launch an AWACS alert, to cover our surveillance period, was fruitless. Not only was Tinker AFB suffering from its own weather woes, an AWACS bird wasn't ready to swing into gear.

Forty-five minutes after our original brief time and still more than two hours before launch, the aircraft commander said what we were thinking, "There has to be a destination that will allow us to fly." Syracuse Hancock International was 371 miles due north of Norfolk and was forecasted VFR at our proposed recovery time. It was within reach as a destination following the nearly four-hour mission. Since it required no alternate, it was a godsend, or so we thought.

Two hours before takeoff, we were back on a typical briefing timeline, except we also were into our alert-30 window. We honestly were not capable of meeting the requirements of such a posture. Minutes following the brief, we were pressed into our alert responsibilities since our airborne crew now was without radar and returning to base. Regardless of our capabili-

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ties, we had decided to fly, and we needed to press hard to launch.

We were airborne by 0035 and responding to the alert call. The flight was uneventful, but we were doing everything we could to remain attentive. During the last hour of our coverage time, NORAD asked how long we could remain on station. The need for this extension was obvious. The Tinker weather forecast called for eight

inches to a foot of snow during a 24-hour period and we already were four hours into it. We reluctantly allotted an extra 15 minutes but realized this wasn't the miracle NORAD had hoped for.

Having half an hour left to remain on station, my copilot requested weather for Syracuse International. The airport was above minimums but not VFR. OK, so we would have a little harder time locating the field than we initially thought.

At 0435, we were relieved of station and headed to Syracuse. ATIS reported IFR conditions at 1,000 feet and one and a half miles. By the time we reached the IAF, the ceiling had decreased to the 500-foot minimums. Approach questioned our intentions. With decent visibility and ceilings at mins, we intended to fly the approach and land—what else after being strapped to a Hawk-eye seat for nearly four hours?

We were one mile inside the IAF and established on the approach when ATC reported the ceiling had fallen below mins. Our intentions? Continue, of course—we had nowhere else to go! With ATC's voice continuing to ring in our cockpit, the weight of hours on-station and the need for rest made my first approach anything but stellar. The straight-in TACAN approach was uneventful, with one minor exception; the NAVAID was displaced from the field by five nautical miles. This approach might have stumped a primary student at Whiting Field, but, at that moment, it also held two cruise-experienced aviators, with over 3,000-cumulative hours, at bay.

Before I knew it, I was at the MAP, miles before I expected it and 200 feet high. Why? Thanks to less-than-adequate instrument lighting, I barely could read my BDHI compass card and couldn't see the DME. Confidence in our INS was low because the bearing-range readings did not coincide with rational thought or our TACAN reading. I had little to fall back on for my distance from the NAVAID and, more importantly, the distance to the airfield.

I felt like a student in the simulator on an instrument-check ride; I had minor navigation errors introduced to sidetrack my attention, a controller making remarks that made my brain spin, and rapidly changing weather, forcing decision-making to be an ongoing process. Through our troubleshooting of the INS, mental calculations of the decreasing weather minimums and listening to approach bark at us, the concept that the NAVAID and the field were not colocated completely dropped from my scan. And there at the MAP, approach has nothing better to do than ask what our intentions are since we are "overhead the field!" What? Sure

enough, below us was a perfectly good runway, actually two! We pulled off power in an attempt to circle and land. I realized two things: The reported weather was not what I observed at the field, and I was inside the MAP with nothing left to do but wave off. Frustrated, I executed a missed approach and requested a refresh of missed-approach heading and altitude. As we climbed, approach again asked our intentions. The copilot passed a PIREP at the MAP and over the field to approach and told them we would make a second attempt. We had run out of options.

We decided what we needed to get the aircraft on deck, and we began our second approach. I was amazed at how well the approach went when I followed the published procedures. We broke out at 900 feet (with an 880-foot MDA) and had the runway environment in sight at three miles. I was thankful the air below the cloud layer was as clear as it was when compared to the haze we had wallowed in above the layer. The landing was followed by a typical cross-country turnaround.

Our mission ending was nothing short of an attention-grabbing experience—like being at the boat! I took away several learning points:


- Proper rest before any event can't be over-emphasized.

- Be careful how far you push to maintain your Navy pride; press to get the mission done.

- Optimize all weather-observation sources. Frequent chats with a metro station would have increased our situational awareness of weather changes at Syracuse Hancock International.

- Do your homework. We didn't fully review the approach and airfield, and you read what happened.

- Make a decision. Once we were cancelled, I Monday-morning-quarterbacked whether we should have reconsidered. When an option for a suitable field arose, we took it. Should we have changed our decision?

- If you have a chaplain scheduled with you, keep him with you until all the paperwork is done. 

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